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*Conserving Connecticut. Connecting people to the land.*

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*Testimony of Eric Hammerling, Executive Director, Connecticut Forest & Park Association*

Senator Fonfara, Representative Rowe, and Members of the Program Review and Investigations Committee,

My name is Eric Hammerling and I am the Executive Director of the Connecticut Forest & Park Association (CFPA) as well as a Steering Committee Member of the Working Lands Alliance.

I submit these comments in support of the important work being done by the CT Department of Agriculture's Farmland Preservation Program to keep farms in business, protect prime agricultural soils, and conserve agricultural lands for current and future food production.

With a small but experienced staff, the Farmland Preservation Program seems to have hit its stride over the last few years due to a steady stream of income through the two channels of the Community Investment Act and lump-sum bonding at the \$10 million/year level. Financial resources are keeping pace with a growing appreciation in Connecticut for the critical importance of preserving our agricultural land base and heritage. These preserved agricultural lands are an important building block that will enable us to ultimately achieve sustainable communities with numerous local benefits to health and economic vitality. Agricultural lands that are not in some way preserved through either easements or zoning are extremely vulnerable to subdivision/housing development which typically leads to the loss of productive soils ... a loss that is rarely reversible.

It appears to us that the only bottlenecks that constrain even greater success by the Farmland Preservation Program lie in two areas: 1) adequate staff resources; and 2) the time drains and frustrations associated with the state contracting process. I provide some additional thoughts on these two areas below.

1) There are only 5 full-time staff at the Department of Agriculture who work on Farmland Preservation (4 program and 1 administrative support staff). Staff are experienced, dedicated, and efficient but are literally overwhelmed by requests for

assistance combined with the many ongoing aspects of due diligence required for agricultural land preservation. To add to the staff burden, job stimulus funding was approved last year for the purpose of reclaiming farmland, but this funding is limited to small grants. The positive of this program, of course, is that much important work will be done with state support, but the negative is that there is an administrative burden associated with so many small grants. In fact, the \$5 million dedicated to this program would support 200 grants at the \$25,000 level, or there may be many more grants than this if requests are smaller. This represents a LOT of work to manage these grants in addition to existing farmland preservation program commitments. The Department is looking at creative ways to use personal service agreements and partnerships as stop-gap measures to help implement these programs, but it is clear that with additional staff support, the overall Farmland Preservation Program would be able to accomplish even more.

2) It is no secret that state contracting processes can be long and frustrating for those fortunate enough to receive support from a funding program. There are extra steps that, from an outside observer's perspective, don't seem to add significant value to the contracting process. For example, the Attorney General's office is required to approve the "form" of state grants/contracts. The AG's office will bump back paperwork for minor paperwork inconsistencies such as an organization writing the end of its official name with the abbreviation "inc." versus spelling out "incorporated." This kind of nitpicking does not make a material difference in protecting the interests of the state (in our opinion), but it does result in both delay and frustration. This kind of issue can easily add one month to the contracting process (especially if there is the need for a Board vote, notarization, etc.), and adds frustration to both grantees and Departmental staff who get caught in the middle and have to spend additional time that is already limited.

Conservation of agricultural soils is a fundamental best management practice that should be encouraged by farmers who benefit from Farmland Preservation funding. We believe that the current guidelines for the Farmland Preservation Program are designed to achieve this important end. After all, the agricultural easements on these programs are intended to be perpetual and it is difficult to assure perpetual farming as an ongoing benefit to the state if prime agricultural soils are not preserved.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify on the important issue of Farmland Preservation, and I am glad to respond to any questions you may have.